

CHEMISTRY

Sermon for Pentecost 24—Mk 12:38-44

LPC, 11/8/15

Who here remembers their high school chemistry? I took my last chemistry class in 1975, so I'm a little rusty. Please bear with me as I attempt an analogy.

According to chemistry, all matter is made up of atoms. Atoms of different chemical elements combine to form compounds. The capacity of an atom to form compounds by combining with other atoms is referred to as that atom's valence. With me so far? If not, don't worry, there won't be a quiz.

Let me give an example. We all know that common water has the chemical formula H₂O. That means that in every water molecule there are two Hydrogen atoms (that's what the H₂ means) and one oxygen atom (that's the O.) Why are there two hydrogen atoms to one oxygen atom in a water molecule? Because oxygen has a valence of 2. Hydrogen has a valence of 1.

Here's an oxygen atom with its valence of 2 (hold up a fist with two fingers extended.) To form a stable compound, both those valences must be engaged. Here's a hydrogen atom with its valence of 1 (hold up other fist with one finger extended.) A single hydrogen atom can only engage one of oxygen's two valences. The combination of one oxygen atom and one hydrogen atom leaves one valence flopping in the breeze, hungry for another atom. So, to be stable, a water molecule requires an oxygen atom with a hydrogen atom on each of its two valences. That's why we end up with H₂O.

Now think of human beings as very complex atoms. We start out with dozens of valences, wagging around, looking to hook up with other atoms. And it usually doesn't take us long to fill them. As I've said, an unoccupied valence makes for instability. Typically human beings will have a valence taken up with family, one or more with work, still others with hobbies and interests, and sometimes with worries and preoccupations. When people feel frazzled, it's because they have a finite number of valences and too many other "atoms" competing for them.

This is a problem, because human beings have at least one valence that is dedicated to one particular kind of atom, and only that one atom out all the others can make for a stable compound. We can try to plug this specialized valence into other kinds of atoms and enjoy a temporary stability, but the resulting compound never lasts long, and may actually lead to all kinds of trouble.

This is where my analogy will start to make sense for those among us who flunked out of chemistry. This specialized valence is the one made just for God, and each of us has one. But with so many other things competing for our attention and energy we often use up our God valence with some other concern. Consequently, even when God comes close we have no valences free to hook up with God.

Perhaps this is why people who are poor, or ill, or wounded, or addicted, or incomplete, have an easier time making room for God than those who have all their valences already filled and are therefore satisfied with themselves. People who can admit they are broken know they have empty valences. Jesus had way more success preaching to the hungry and the sinners and the wounded and the outcasts than he did to the mainstream of society, who thought they had everything figured out.

Thus we have the example in today's Gospel reading of the scribe, a person of education, position and influence, who despite his large monetary contribution to the temple treasury is further from the Kingdom of God than the poor widow, who put in a pittance, but a pittance that was everything she had. This is an act of faith if I ever heard one.

Lest we think that this is just a Bible story with little relevance to modern life, let me lay some statistics on you taken from the 2007 Baylor Survey of American Religion, as reported by Scot McKnight on Belief.net:

Poor people are more likely to give a higher percent of their income than wealthy people. Americans who make \$10,000 or less give 11.2% of their income, while those who make \$150,000 or more give 2.7% of their income. Percentage of giving is in inverse proportion to income. Widows and widowers are the most likely to tithe. Remember that tithing is the ancient practice of giving one tenth of one's income to the church or to charitable purposes, in gratitude for God's goodness to us. 16.7% of widowers tithe, and 20.1% of widows.

What do these poor and bereft people have that those of us who are comfortable don't have? Well, they certainly have faith. It takes faith to skim 10% or more off the top of your earnings rather than wait and see what's left after you've paid all your other bills.

But besides faith, what people on the bottom have, because it's always being pointed out to them, is an awareness of their need: a need for something beyond themselves. Need has a way of opening a person to God. Being unable to admit need is *the* primary barrier to allowing God's grace into one's life.

This is so counter-cultural it isn't funny. You don't admit weakness in public. It leaves you open to attack. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. But, as long as we maintain our self-sufficiency, the more we block out God. The way to have God in your life is to leave a valence free for God. This means vulnerability. This often means a sensation of instability. But it is also the way to eternal, abundant life.

In our prayers, at church, at the Holy Table, in the love and service of other people, we free up a valence for God. The more we do this in our daily dealings, not just at church, the more heaven breaks into the here and now. God is always ready to fill our empty places, if, instead of covering them up, we leave them open to love.